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Latin America: The Human Rights Question

The constant actions of military governments in South America against civil liberties have led to numerous human rights violations in recent years. The abrogation of constitutional guarantees protecting individual freedoms has also focused the attention of church groups, international agencies, and the international press on human rights practices in that region.

Chile has been the main target of this criticism, but heavy attention has also been directed at other authoritarian regimes in the southern cone. The bloody struggle between the left and right in Argentina, resulting in over 1,200 deaths in 1976 alone, is subjecting the government of President Videla to increasingly adverse criticism.

The Uruguayan government has been widely criticized for its mistreatment of political prisoners. The Nineteen-day dictatorship in Paraguay has ruled with an iron hand for more than 30 years, and its internal security practices have long been a subject of criticism. Less attention has been paid to Brazil in recent months, even though human rights violations will occur there.

As a whole, however, there has probably been a slight improvement in the human rights situation in these countries during the past year. The prospects for further progress are encouraging as long as the full weight of international opinion is brought to bear on the problem. Any UN action continued as a threat or reprisal, however, could lead to some backsliding and surely would stimulate more charges that the UN is interfering in the domestic affairs of these countries.

Argentina

Human rights violations both by the left and the right remain serious in Argentina, but the frequency and scale of abuses by the security forces and by rightist vigilantes has diminished noticeably since the week last summer. The government now at least issues public lists of those it detains, although the completeness and accuracy of the lists are open to question.

It is difficult to judge how many prisoners have now been released or at least accounted for, since the total number of those arrested is not known. International criticism and investigations of the human rights situation in Argentina have generated considerable irritation among Argentine officials, particularly those charged with putting an end to leftist guerrilla warfare.

Although the armed forces have had marked success against the terrorists, the job is still far from complete. If the guerrillas stage renewed provocations, they are in charge of counterterrorist activities and probably push for a return to the brutal roundups of suspected leftists that were relatively common last year.

President Videla expects some worsening of relations with the US over the human rights issue but apparently finds his hands tied by political constraints imposed by hard-line factions within the armed forces.

Brazil

Brazilian security forces have operated with considerable autonomy since the military took power in 1964. The constitution of 1967 and a number of ex-



Presidents Pinochet (L) and Videla

traconstitutional decrees have suspended such rights as habeas corpus for persons accused of crimes involving "national security" and given the security forces the authority to detain suspects arbitrarily for lengthy periods, leading to abuses of human rights.

Last year, however, President Giscard took a strong public stand against torture by removing a military security official and a major commander after two civilians died in military jails. Since January 1976, there have been only occasional reports of torture of political prisoners.

There are no reliable figures on the number of political prisoners in Brazil. In October 1976, Amnesty International reported that some 2,000 political prisoners were arrested during 1975 and 1976 and that between 700 and 800 of them were still under detention. These estimates are highly speculative and have no firm statistics.

The improvement in the human rights situation in Brazil during the past year has been primarily because of President Giscard's personal intervention on the side of moderation, the strong interest shown by the Brazilian Catholic Church, and the attention given to the subject in the international press.

Chile

The government of President Pinochet has demonstrated progress in its human rights practices over the past several months. Overall improvements have also been noted by some of the junta's most persistent critics and supporters of human rights in Chile.

The number of prisoners held without charge has declined sharply; the government says only one major figure from the Allende era is still imprisoned without charge. It has offered to exchange him for a prominent prisoner held by the Cubans.

Most of those being tried or serving sentences are now out on bail, on parole, or under house arrest. The government is also taking steps to commute the sentences of many persons already convicted.

Reports of illegal detention, torture, or killings have tapered off considerably. There have apparently been no such instances this year. On the other hand, the authoritarian control of the junta has not been relaxed, and state-of-siege restric-

tions remain in effect more than three years after the military takeover. Cases of the 13 persons who "disappeared" late last year, along with hundreds of others missing since the 1973 coup, have not been resolved, and suspicious often point to the Directorate of National Intelligence.

The directorate has operated as a secret police force responsible only to Pinochet. There are some indications that it may have refined its practices and adopted more subtle methods of dealing with alleged "enemies of the state." Evidence remains largely circumstantial for the most part, and it is difficult to pin down responsibility for the illegal detentions and unexplained disappearances.

The government asserts that these people have either fled the country or gone underground. In some cases, leftists may be attempting to discredit the government by concocting stories of alleged mistreatment.

The ad hoc group of the UN Human Rights Commission has issued a report condemning the "unfettered power" of the Chilean intelligence directorate and charging that the machinery for political repression in Chile has not been dismantled. Committee members strongly reprimanded the Pinochet government's stubborn refusal to allow an inspection team to visit the country.

Human rights remain a pervasive problem. The junta will probably continue the slow trend toward normalization. The pace, however, will depend largely on the junta's perception of its security requirements and Pinochet's willingness to

exact more effective reforms. The military-dominated Mender government, which came to power last September, has grown increasingly conscious of its poor reputation abroad on the human rights issue. It has shown serious concern over the deteriorating state of its relations with the US.

Some positive measures have been taken, but the military's grip on the government has tightened, and many civilians have been deprived of their political rights.

A high government official, in a recent address to an international organization, publicly committed the government to rectifying the situation. New measures under consideration include inviting inspection by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and establishing an ad hoc committee that would quickly determine the status of individuals about whom concern is expressed.

Administration officials also have promised that a general liberalization is in the works for the detention system for subversives and that other significant improvements will be announced soon. The government late last year moved to ease severe anti-subversive penalties; other measures that are aimed at restoring due process, however, are bogged down in the legislative process. As of October, about 2,000 persons were being detained on charges of crimes against the state.

Paraguay

Those concerned about human rights in Paraguay often point to the detention of political prisoners and the treatment of the unassimilated Indian population.

Investigative field trips to Indian areas have failed to confirm any official plan of abuse or genocide. It is likely, however, that Indians living outside these areas do suffer abuses.

President Stroessner heads the most stable regime in South America, but official concern about "terrorism" and "subversion" is paramount and accounts for the state of siege that has been in effect for the past 30 years. Estimates of people currently being detained on such charges range from 100 to 400.

The government has been moved by recent international criticism to take steps to improve its tarnished image. It is apparently living up to its promise to bring subversives to trial and to release those against whom there is no solid evidence. Trials of political prisoners—the first held in years—began at the end of 1975.

Living conditions for most detainees have improved considerably. As many as 50 persons suspected of subversion have been released since August, including four who had been in jail for 23 years.

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